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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study that analyses the questions asked and services offered at the information desk in the reference department at the Kent State University main library. A total of 460 questions asked during 52 hours of scheduled time at the information desk in Spring 1997 were categorized. The main types of questions were directional; ready reference; instructional; electronic maintenance; specific subject questions; and involved research questions referred to subject specialists. Data analysis revealed that the majority of questions were directional or instructional in nature, indicating that the information desk is meeting its primary purpose. The largest quantity of instructional questions dealt with use of electronic resources, indicating that the major change in reference services is caused by technological advances in information resources. The quantity of questions requiring referral to other campus departments and buildings revealed the need for additional training of information desk workers. Many directional questions dealt with inquiries about the main location of the periodical collection, showing the need for signs to direct the user to this department. A further analysis of questions asked at the information and reference desks should be conducted during all service hours in order to indicate strengths and weaknesses in this reference model. The data coding sheet for information desk questions is appended. (Author/DLS)

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QUESTIONS ASKED AT A LIBRARY'S INFORMATION DESK: WHAT MEANS COULD BE USED TO IMPROVE SERVICES?

A Master's Research Paper submitted to the
Kent State University School of Library Science
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree Master of Library Science

by

Mary Crowe

October, 1997

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Mary Crowe

ABSTRACT

QUESTIONS ASKED AT A LIBRARY'S INFORMATION DESK: WHAT MEANS COULD BE USED TO IMPROVE SERVICES?

This study is a data analysis of questions asked at the information desk located in the reference department at the main library at Kent State University. The researcher, a graduate reference assistant, categorized a total of 460 questions asked during 52 hours of scheduled time at the information desk in mid-semester of the Spring 1997 term. The questions were examined by major types and then further sub-divided into smaller categories. The main breakdown involved the following kinds of questions: directional, ready reference, instructional, electronic maintenance, specific subject questions, and involved research questions referred to subject specialists. The data analysis revealed that the majority of questions were directional or instructional in nature. Thus, the information desk is meeting its primary purpose of providing directional and instructional assistance to library patrons. The largest quantity of instructional questions dealt with use of electronic resources, that is, the online catalog, research databases, and the World Wide Web/Internet. This fact indicates the major change in reference service is caused by technological advances in information resources; much staff time is spent in providing individualized instruction in the use of this reference equipment. The quantity of questions requiring referral to other campus departments and buildings reveals the need for additional training of information desk workers with tours, maps, and instruction about major library and campus

departments and buildings. A large quantity of directional questions dealt with inquiries about the main location of the periodicals collection, thus showing the need for signs to direct the user to this department. A further analysis of questions asked at the information desk and the reference desks should be conducted during all service hours in order to truly indicate strengths and weaknesses of service in this reference model.

Master's Research Paper by

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CHAPTER 1.

INTRODUCTION

Reference departments in many academic libraries are being restructured in order to fill users' needs. The rapid growth of information technology, the increase in the number of library users who need assistance, and library budget cuts have mandated the more efficient use and scheduling of staff members. It is now impossible for a librarian to work at a traditional reference desk and instantaneously answer all patrons' requests as in the past. Reference department staff members' duties have increased tremendously to include: directional queries; materials' locations; specific item requests; subject searches; in-depth research projects; assistance with print reference sources; instruction in the use of the online catalog, CD-ROM databases, and World Wide Web/Internet searches; troubleshooting computer equipment; clearing paper jams; and replacement of printer paper and ribbons. Since it is not feasible for all staff members to perform all tasks, many reference departments have begun to differentiate duties performed by specific staff members.

The Information Desk and tiered reference services have been adopted by many reference departments. Graduate students and library support staff normally work at the Information Desk. It is theorized that with adequate and ongoing training, these members of the library staff are able to competently

answer directional and ready reference questions; specific item requests; computer and CD-ROM search assistance and instruction; and technical assistance, such as paper jams, printer ribbon replacement, printer paper installation, and other basic functions that accompany the advancements in information technology. They may refer questions that require subject expertise and in-depth research advice to professional librarians. When professional reference librarians are thus relieved from the performance of these basic tasks, they are free to answer those questions that require subject expertise. They also have time to give in-depth research advice and instruction. In addition, duties of the professional academic librarian often include group bibliographic instruction.

Service provided at an Information Desk depends on adequate training of staff and efficient scheduling of that staff. Training and scheduling are determined by analyzing the types and frequency of questions normally received in person and by phone at the Information Desk. According to Herman, "Training for workers at an Information Desk should be based on the evaluation of questions, rather than on the knowledge of reference sources."[1] Also, quality information service can be provided only by anticipating users' needs; therefore, evaluation of questions asked at an Information Desk is necessary. It is, of course, essential that Information Desk workers have thorough training in the use of reference sources. Questions are often, however, directional or informational and require a knowledge of the library building and the locations and functions of other offices and buildings on the campus. Referral to other campus offices or local agencies

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[1]Douglas Herman, "But Does It Work? Evaluating the Brandeis Reference Model," Reference Services Review 22, no. 4 (1994): 25.

can only be provided with proper training of Information Desk employees. A study of the questions asked at an Information Desk can also determine the need for increased signage, additional printed guides and maps, and other means of reducing the repetitive nature of directional, informational, and instructional questions.

Purpose of the Study

This study is intended to describe the types of questions that are normally asked in person and by phone at the Information Desk of an academic library.

Definitions of Terms

Terms as they are used in this paper are defined below in order to clarify their meaning for the reader.

INFORMATION DESK: A desk in the library that is staffed by graduate library school students and support staff members from library departments other than the reference department.

PROFESSIONAL REFERENCE LIBRARIAN: A staff member of the reference department who has earned a Master's Degree in Library Science.

DIRECTIONAL QUESTIONS: Those "questions which require only the location of a particular item, source, or service."[2]

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[2]Sharon L. Baker and F. Wilfrid Lancaster. The Measurement and Evaluation of Library Services, 2d ed. (Arlington, VA: Information Resources Press, 1991), 236.

READY REFERENCE QUESTIONS: Those "questions which require a single, usually factual and uncomplicated answer from a standard reference work such as an encyclopedia or almanac."[3]

SPECIFIC SUBJECT QUESTIONS: Those "questions which require more information on a subject and are generally answered from one or more books, articles, bibliographies, or encyclopedias."[4] .

RESEARCH QUESTIONS: Those questions which require in-depth instruction on techniques which can be used to search for information on an often complicated topic. The questions are handled by appointment and are always referred to a subject specialist in the reference department.

INSTRUCTIONAL QUESTIONS: Those questions which require assistance in using a printed reference tool, the online public access catalog, the World Wide Web/Internet, or CD-ROM research databases.

ELECTRONIC MAINTENANCE: Any troubleshooting of computer equipment, including computer paper and computer ribbon replacements.

Limitations of the Study

The study was only conducted at one library and findings, therefore, cannot be generalized to all academic libraries.

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[3]Ibid.
[4]Ibid.

CHAPTER 2.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous articles have been written about the use of graduate students and support staff who provide service and referrals at Information Desks in academic libraries. Studies have been undertaken to determine the effectiveness and efficiency of reference departments that use an Information Desk as a focal point for reference services.

Beth S. Woodward, Central Information Services Librarian, the University of Illinois, has written an article that explains an evaluation conducted in April and May 1987 of an information desk administered by the reference staff of the library at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign.[5] The information desk is designed to handle directional questions; to answer ready reference questions using a small collection of reference materials; to properly answer or direct incoming phone calls to the reference department; and to instruct patrons in the use of the online catalog, card catalog, and the automated circulation system. Information desk staff members are instructed to answer as many questions as possible, but they are encouraged to refer questions to which answers are not easily accessible.

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[5]Beth S. Woodward, "The Effectiveness of an Information Desk Staffed by Graduate Students and Nonprofessionals," College & Research Libraries 50 (July 1989): 455-467.

Orientation sessions and weekly training sessions are conducted for the staff of the information desk. However, in a test of the Information Desk conducted in 1987 using unobtrusive methodology, data on 164 transactions were collected. Only 62.2 percent of these questions asked by 100 surrogates were answered correctly; however 83.5 percent could have been answered correctly using available reference sources. The study also determined that 38 questions, or 23 percent, were not referred appropriately. The conclusion of this study indicated that a backup of professional reference librarians is necessary for the information desk staff to operate efficiently.

An article written by Jan Novak, Northern Campus Resources Centre, Queensland University of Technology, describes the 1989 evaluation of the Information Desk program at the Northern Campuses of the Queensland University of Technology located in Australia.[6] All staff working at these Information Desks are either qualified librarians or library staff trained in reference work. The study was conducted by analyzing four factors: an analysis of Information Desk transactions; a survey of users in questionnaire and interview format to determine their satisfaction with services; a survey of Information Desk staff to determine their job satisfaction; and a meeting of Information Desk staff to get their responses to the evaluation and their suggestions for enhancement of the service in the future. Some suggestions for improvement of the program were to remove the telephone from the Information Desks to one central location for all the campuses and to consider a two-tiered service--with an Information Desk for

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[6]Jan Novak and John Lidstone, "At Your Service. Evaluation of an Information Desk Program," Australian Academic and Research Libraries. AARL 22 (March 1991): 25-40.

most questions and referrals for complicated, in-depth questions. It was decided to evaluate the Information Desk program in the future by focusing on particular aspects of the service rather than conduct such a comprehensive, time-consuming evaluation process.

In her article about Western Illinois University Library, Kathleen E. Joswick, Reference Librarian, describes the introduction of an Information Desk into the Reference Department during the fall of 1989.[7] An Information Desk was introduced into the large reference area to provide directional information and to give one-on-one assistance with the new command-driven online catalog, ILLINET Online (IO). The Information Desk, staffed by nonprofessional, civil service employees, was located near the eleven new IO terminals and their printers. A Reference Desk staffed by professional librarians was placed at the opposite end of the reference area. The Information Desk displayed a sign identifying it as the "Information Desk" and signs pointed the way to the Reference Desk. The Reference Desk bore signs reading "Reference Assistance" and "Reference Librarian." During the second semester of this operation, data about the types of questions asked were kept during the same weeks at both the Information and the Reference Desks. The statistical sheets were almost identical; the Information Desk was handling practically the same quantity and types of questions as the Reference Desk. A combination of personnel leaves and budget cuts forced the library to close the Information Desk at the end of the academic year. When paraprofessionals were once again available to help in the

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[7]Kathleen E. Joswick, "The Information Desk: Source of Directions or Misconceptions," Illinois Libraries 73 (November 1991): 526-528.

Reference Department, they were placed as "Reference Assistants" at the Reference Desk. Professional librarians intercepted the questions initially and referred those questions requiring ready reference help or one-on-one computer instruction to the reference assistants.

Diane Nahl, Assistant Professor in the School of Library and Information Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa, and three librarians at the University of Hawaii Library have written an article about the use of graduate library school students to staff the library's Information Desk.[8] During the semester that the graduate students take their initial required reference course, they are assigned to staff the Information Desk. It is felt that the students learn to work with the public and to conduct reference interviews. By helping users with the online catalog, the students also learn to give instruction and become skilled in database searching. Most of the questions asked at the Information Desk deal with the location of materials, library policies, the interpretation of printouts, and how to search for information in the online catalog or research databases. The librarians at the reference desks are there to give in-depth research and reference assistance. Approximately 100 library school students per year provide 2000 hours of public service at the information desk. Research indicates that the graduate students provide quality service at the Information Desk. These students receive training and experience while they provide public service staffing at no cost to the University.

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[8]Diane Nahl and others, "Effectiveness of Fieldwork at an Information Desk: A Prototype for Academic Library-Library School Collaboration," Journal of Academic Librarianship 20 (November 1994): 291-294.

A new reference model is described in an article by William L. Whitson, Reference Librarian at Doe Library, University of California.[9] Reference service is defined not as a single activity, but as a composite of several activities that need to be staffed, structured, and evaluated separately. Whitson defines five service areas in this differentiated model. The first, an Information Desk, must be limited to handling directional and general information questions, and all such inquiries, either in person or by phone, must be directed to that desk alone. The second service, Technical Assistance, provides users with help in the use of electronic resources, that is, CD-ROM databases and online catalogs. The third function, Whitson describes as "Information Lookup." This service answers questions by phone, e-mail, or fax within a reasonable length of time. Each library has specific guidelines to determine the kinds of questions that will be handled, the clienteles that will be served, and the amount of time that should be allocated to each question. The fourth category of service described is Research Consultation. General research advice could be offered on a walk-in basis, while advanced research assistance might only be offered by appointments. The fifth service provides the patrons with Library Instruction. This service could be divided among support staff, research consultants, and technical assistants, depending upon the type of instruction needed. Whitson insists that every reference staff member must specialize to some degree. It is no longer possible for a person to maintain a comprehensive knowledge of the vast amount of information resources. He

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[9]William L. Whitson, "Differentiated Service: A New Reference Model," The Journal of Academic Librarianship 21 (March 1995): 103-110.

contends that differentiation of services will allow the specialization of reference staff.

An article by John C. Stalker, Head, Information Services Department, and Marjorie E. Murfin, Reference Librarian, Ohio State University Libraries, describes the high-quality of information service offered by the reference department of Brandeis University Library in Waltham, Massachusetts.[10] This medium-sized library of approximately 850,000 volumes attained the highest score yet achieved on the Wisconsin-Ohio Reference Evaluation Program (WOREP) by a general reference department in a four-year institution. The library was using an innovative research consultation model when it attained its high score on the WOREP. In this model, graduate students staff the general reference desk. They are trained by professional librarians to handle specific low-level questions and have an "Information Desk Assistants Manual" of about 100 pages to help them. All other questions are referred to the professional librarians in the consultation office. The consultation model permits the librarian to spend 20 minutes per patron. The authors of this article conducted a two-day on-site observation of the operations of the Brandeis University Library's reference department while using its innovative consultation model of reference service. They concluded that the intensive use of electronic resources, an excellent reference collection, good architecture, strong administrative support for service, and, most importantly, adequate time provided by the consultation model contributed to this reference department's success.

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[10]John C. Stalker and Marjorie E. Murfin, "Quality Reference Service. A Preliminary Case Study," The Journal of Academic Librarianship 22 (November 1996): 423-429.

Cheryl LaGuardia, the Coordinator of the Electronic Teaching Center, Harvard College Library, Widener Library, compares the technological advances in information storage and retrieval in today's libraries to those changes that took place in the library of a television network in the 1950s' movie Desk Set starring Tracy and Hepburn.[11] Tracy is the computer expert that is hired by the executives of the network to computerize their offices. Hepburn is the head of the research department (the network's library). After a struggle of wills, Tracy finally convinces Hepburn that the new computer system's information storage and access capabilities will save her and her staff time, thus enabling them to concentrate on the many complex questions they must answer. Of course, in the movie, Tracy, Hepburn, and the computer system live happily ever after.

LaGuardia states in her article, however, that today's library technology does not make access to information quicker or easier for library patrons and library staff.[12] Reference librarians, according to the author, must spend a large portion of their time learning how to use the constantly changing computer systems in order to teach library patrons how to use them. The author states that academic libraries have purchased systems that exist rather than develop systems that would best fit library users' needs. According to her, librarians need to become systems' designers in order to develop user-friendly computer interfaces for library users. She recommends a restructuring of library reference departments, but she stresses beginning with the design of the online system so

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[11]Cheryl LaGuardia, "Desk Set Revisited: Reference Librarians, Reality, and Research Systems' Design," The Journal of Academic Librarianship 21 (January 1995): 7-9.
[12]Ibid., 7.

that patrons can use the computer systems with no assistance.

Margaret Morrison, Head of the Reference and Access Services Department in the Health Sciences Library at the University of North Carolina, describes the history and future of reference services.[13] She explains the changes that have taken place in the structure of reference departments, in the sources used for information, and in the services offered by the reference staff. In 1876, according to Morrison, Samuel Green first recommended that librarians provide readers' advisory services in order to improve the intellect and morality of American citizens. Then, in the early 1900s, librarians began to instruct library patrons in the use of information sources so that they might do research on their own. In the 1930s and 1940s, librarians attempted to enhance the quality of reference collections available in America's libraries. Morrison says that in the 1960s and 1970s librarians realized the importance of the reference interview, and emphasis was placed on good communication between the librarian and the information seeker. However, she says that in the past twenty-five years computer technology has drastically changed the structure of reference departments and the services provided to library patrons.

Morrison insists that, due to continued technological advances in information resources, librarians will have to become more than information providers and subject experts. In Morrison's opinion, paraprofessionals will

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[13]Margaret Morrison, "Reference Now and When," Journal of Library Administration 20, no. 3 / 4 (1995): 131-140.

provide reference assistance for all patrons except those needing help with in-depth research. She says that most users will be able to search for their own information needs on computers with user-friendly interfaces that are capable of searching natural-language queries. Reference librarians will become routinely involved with creating information resources that will fit the unique information needs of their users. Morrison predicts that librarians will need to be adept at systems analysis, data management, and graphic design. She foresees "the client-oriented model of reference services, with its emphasis on meeting the needs of the individual with customized information delivery, its reliance on automated information sources, and its promise of wide access."[14]

Elizabeth Malia, Supervisor, Reference Unit of the Information Services Division, John F. Kennedy Memorial Library, Eastern Washington University, describes the new service model based on the principle of triage that was adopted by the reference unit in the fall of 1995.[15] According to The American Dictionary, triage is "a process for sorting injured into groups based on their need for or likely benefit from immediate medical treatment. Triage is used on the battlefield, at disaster sites, and in hospital emergency rooms when limited medical resources must be allocated."[16] For the model of reference service used at Eastern Washington University Library, triage is defined as the "screening of patron requests by student assistants and paraprofessionals to determine the

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[14]Morrison, 139.

[15]Elizabeth Malia, "Triage and Tiers," Library Mosaics 7 (November/December 1996): 19.

[16]The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992), 1908.

relative priority and/or depth of assistance needed, and then referring requests appropriately for that assistance."[17]

Malia explains that in the Spring of 1995, before the new reference service model was adopted at Eastern Washington University Library, a study was done to determine weak areas in reference service. The new model was intended to resolve the problem areas. The triage model consisted basically of three tiers. The first tier was comprised of student assistants whose major duties were mechanical and directional assistance. Paraprofessionals, who made up the second tier in this reference model, handled ready reference questions, routine reference questions, initial search strategy, and instruction in the use of the online catalog. Reference librarians, who made up the third tier were responsible for assisting with in-depth research questions, online database searching, and bibliographic instruction.

This reference model mainly altered the duties of the unit's two paraprofessionals who were told to "rove." They went from computer to computer in the reference area, giving assistance as needed. During peak times, when an excessive number of library patrons needed assistance, the student assistants and professional librarians also became temporary rovers.

Typically, the paraprofessionals or "rovers" instructed patrons in the use of research databases, explained how to locate Library of Congress classification numbers, and showed patrons how to use printed reference materials. The paraprofessionals also determined which questions should be directed to

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[17]Malia, 130.

reference librarians. (The biggest problem with the service model was considered to be this referral of patrons to librarians for assistance.)

Three weeks into the Fall 1996 quarter and the use of the new model, a new online computer system was set up. A month after that a new CD-ROM network option was implemented. Even with these technological changes in reference resources, there were compliments on reference services from both students and faculty, and there were no major complaints from any library patrons seeking reference assistance. The library reference staff felt that their services to patrons had improved. A study of the "triage" model of reference service similar to the one conducted in the Spring 1995 was conducted in the Spring 1996 to determine the success of this new model. Unfortunately, the results of the Spring 1996 study were not available at the time of the publication of this article.

Carol Hammond, Head of Research and Information Access Services, Arizona State University West, describes the manner in which paraprofessionals have enhanced the quality of reference services at a new academic library at a new university campus.[18] This two-level model of reference service, consisting of paraprofessionals and reference librarians, has been in place at Arizona State University West, Phoenix campus, for four years. The main campus of Arizona State is located in Tempe, 35 miles away. The ASU Online Catalog was available at the West campus library when it was opened. This catalog provides access to the following materials: books in all the ASU libraries; seven periodical indexes; a full-text encyclopedia; catalogs of other institutions; in-house indexes; and guides

[18]Carol Hammond, "Information and Research Support Services: The Reference Librarian and the Information Paraprofessional," The Reference Librarian 37 (1992): 91-104.

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to special collections. Reference librarians at the new library needed time to perform the following duties: develop a strong reference collection for the new library; provide classroom instruction; offer an advanced level of research assistance; and, develop faculty research collections. Paraprofessionals staff the Information Desk, the only desk in the reference area. They are trained in reference work at regularly-scheduled instruction sessions. These staff members are instructed to direct specialized questions to a reference librarian who is always on duty. In addition, the use of appointments for consultation services is encouraged. The major duties of the paraprofessionals include the following tasks: assistance with the online catalog and research duties; initiating the large quantity of interlibrary loan requests; and, answering directional and informational questions.

A station for answering telephone reference questions was set up in an office area away from the Information Desk. An online computer terminal, shelves of reference books, phone books, and information sources about the campus are available in the telephone reference area. The Information Desk paraprofessionals are assigned regular hours to work in the telephone reference area.

Hammond states some problems with the two-level reference model at the Arizona State University West campus library. A high turnover rate among the paraprofessionals has resulted probably from lack of job promotions and good salaries. Professional librarians have decided to spend time working at the

Information Desk, because they feel that they need to keep abreast of reference tools.

According to Hammond, the ASU West reference model has been successful in several aspects. Faculty have benefited from extended services from librarians. Librarians provide bibliographic instruction classes that are integrated with courses. The book collection has increased from 40,000 volumes in 1989 to 167,000 in 1992. Individual instruction is given to users of the electronic resources.

Hammond says that a truly evaluative analysis of this reference model has not been conducted. She also thinks that the cost of this model should be assessed. Although money is saved on salaries, Hammond wonders about the turnover rate and the high cost of retraining paraprofessional staff. She also says the cost of providing referral service should be studied.

Larry R. Oberg, Director of Stockwell-Mudd Libraries, Albion College, Albion, Michigan, responds to the article by Hammond by stating his views on the use of paraprofessionals in reference services.[19] He states that in a national survey that he conducted in 1990, he found that "88 percent of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and 66 percent of the smaller college and university libraries nationally regularly assign paraprofessionals to work at their reference desks."[20] From these statistics, Oberg determines that paraprofessionals have been and will be assigned to perform reference services. The dilemma now, he

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[19]Larry R. Oberg, "Response to Hammond: Paraprofessionals at the Reference Desk: The End of the Debate," The Reference Librarian 37 (1992): 105-107.

[20]Ibid., 106.

states, is to determine what duties paraprofessionals should be assigned to perform at the reference desk and how to compensate paraprofessionals for the services they perform. Oberg critically states that the Arizona State model gives the responsibility for reference service triage and reference referral to less-qualified paraprofessionals.

According to Oberg: "Clearly, if we ask paraprofessionals to do what they have watched us doing for years without offering them appropriate compensation, training, incentive, and status, we will ensure dissatisfaction, resentment, and even failure."[21] Oberg further states that librarians have proven that they think that non-MLS staff can perform well at the reference desk. He says, therefore, that library administrators and library professionals should ensure that paraprofessionals receive sufficient and proper reference training and that they receive adequate compensation and status for the tasks they perform.

John O. Christensen, Reference Librarian in the Main Library, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University discusses a management study of the library's reference service.[22] The study was conducted to analyze the quality of service provided by graduate students and library assistants, the quality of their training in reference work, and the quality of their referral of patrons to subject specialist librarians for assistance. The five subject reference departments were reorganized in 1986; each reference department was staffed by one full-time paraprofessional department assistant and several part-time graduate library

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[21]Oberg, 107.

[22]John O. Christensen, "An Evaluation of Reference Desk Service," College and Research Libraries 50 (July 1989): 468-483.

science student assistants. The major purpose of the reorganization was to remove professional reference librarians from reference desk duties so that they could devote their time to collection development, as well as faculty and course-related assistance and instruction. Paraprofessional library staff and graduate student assistants worked at all five subject reference desks. Subject specialist librarians only worked at the reference desks when the paraprofessional reference staff asked for their help in assisting patrons.

During the winter of 1987, after the reference departments had performed under the new system for a full semester, a study of reference services was conducted at the Lee Library. The study consisted of the following five parts: a patron survey, a reference assistant survey, a department assistant survey, a subject specialist survey, and an unobtrusive question test.

The unobtrusive question test revealed the greatest problem area. Fifteen library employees asked five pre-researched questions at each of the five reference desks. Only 36 percent of the seventy-five questions asked by these proxy patrons were answered correctly.

Several other reference service deficiencies were revealed in this study. Many student assistants felt that subject specialists were unavailable when they needed to make referrals. Subject specialists revealed that they received less than two referrals per hour during their scheduled work hours; they felt that student assistants did not make referrals as needed. No uniform system of reference training of paraprofessional staff and graduate student assistants was used by all five reference departments. It was decided that reference training

needed significant improvements. Also, student assistants felt that subject specialist librarians should be involved in their reference training.

Finally, the study at Lee Library indicated that subject specialists wished to return to assigned reference desk hours. The professional librarians felt that working reference desk hours helps them evaluate the demands of patrons on the collections they are required to maintain, analyze the instruction needs of library patrons, and train student assistants and department assistants in reference work.

Gail Z. Erkwright and Mary K. Bolin, Librarians at the Univesity of Idaho, discuss their library's transition from a microfiche catalog to a new CD-ROM catalog, LaserCat, as a member of the Western Library Network, a library cooperative consisting of approximately 300 member libraries.[23] LaserCat subscribers can search the holdings of all of the WLN member libraries or they can search only the holdings of their own library or chosen libraries. In the Fall of 1988, the library was equipped with a total of fifteen LaserCat stations throughout the building. LaserCat is to some extent menu-driven and the user-interface can be learned, but it is not possible to search LaserCat without being instructed in its use. Therefore, six LaserCat terminals were placed in the library's lobby where the card catalog had been located previously. A LaserCat Information Desk was set up in the lobby and staffed from 8 a.m. through 5 p.m., Monday through Friday, for the purpose of training most first-time LaserCat users. During evening and weekend hours LaserCat users could get assistance from librarians at the

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[23]Gail Z. Erkwright and Mary K. Bolin, "No Card Cat—No Problem!: WLN's LaserCat Provides Another Opportunity for Cooperation," RQ 29 (Summer 1990): 525-533.

reference desks in another location in the library. The LaserCat Information Desk was staffed by professional librarians and other staff members with many educational levels and backgrounds from public and technical services. Often, of course, the LaserCat Information Desk workers were asked directional questions and difficult reference questions. The switch from a microfiche catalog to the LaserCat went relatively smoothly according to the library employees who staffed the LaserCat Information Desk. However, these staff members felt that they would have provided better service if they had been provided with more training sessions. They would have preferred orientation in reference service, more extensive training on LaserCat, more library tours to help with directional questions, and more instructional sessions to assist them in answering or referring more difficult questions.

CHAPTER 3.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a data analysis of specific questions asked at the Information Desk located on the first floor at the Main Library at Kent State University during the month of April 1997. (The data coding sheet is attached as an appendix.) One Graduate Reference Assistant, the researcher, kept statistics during fifty-two scheduled hours at the Information Desk. Date, time, and the type of question asked were recorded. The question types were recorded in one of the following categories: directional questions; ready reference questions; instructional questions; electronic maintenance; subject search questions; and research questions. A record was kept of those subject search questions that were referred to a professional reference librarian. All research questions were referred to the appropriate subject specialists who are professional reference librarians.

The Information Desk, which is located at the entry to the Reference Department, has a sign indicating "Information" hanging above it. Adjacent to the Information Desk are two reference desks with a sign hanging above them that clearly labels them as sources of "Information and Reference Assistance." Professional librarians staff these two reference desks. The librarians at these desks answer the phone when the person working at the Information Desk is busy. Also, patrons often ask for directions and general information from those

employees working at the reference desks. Thus, the questions answered at the Information Desk and the two reference desks are often the same type, and the services offered at all three desks often overlap.

This study can be used to decide whether the location of the Information Desk is appropriate. It can also be used in decision-making about staff training and scheduling. The quantity of specific informational and directional questions could indicate a need for more signage.

CHAPTER 4.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

There was a total of 460 questions asked at the information desk during 52 hours which the researcher worked at the desk during the period under study, mid-semester of the Spring 1997 term. Only 6 hours (11.5%) of the researcher's hours were worked in the morning (9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.). The majority of the researcher's work hours (34 hours or 65.4%) were scheduled in the afternoon (12:01 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.). The remaining 12 hours (23.1%) of the 52 hours worked were during the evening hours (5:01 p.m to 10:00 p.m.). Of the total 460 questions asked at the information desk, 42 (9%) were recorded during the morning by the researcher. The greatest amount of questions (344 or 75%) were asked during the afternoon. Seventy-four questions (16%) were asked during evening hours. These statistics show a correlation between the number of hours worked and the number of questions asked at the information desk. The fewest questions (42) were asked during the morning hours when the researcher only worked at the desk for 6 hours. The most questions (344) were taken during the afternoon hours when the researcher worked a total of 34 hours. A moderate amount of information desk questions (74) were recorded during the evening hours when the researcher worked a total of 12 hours. These statistics indicate that the quantity of questions asked in the morning (7 per hour) is close to the

quantity of those taken in the evening (6.2 per hour). A much greater number of questions (11.1 per hour) was recorded during the afternoon period at the desk. The peak period, according to this analysis, occurs at the information desk during the afternoon hours between 12:01 p.m. and 5:00 p.m. Patrons do tend to stop in a library on their lunch hour, on their way from school or work, or immediately after or before college classes. Therefore, in most libraries, afternoon hours are busiest.

Of the total 460 questions, the great majority (407 or 88.5%) were asked in person. Fifty-three (11.5%) were asked via the telephone. However, it is the policy at the information and reference desks of the reference department under study to answer questions in person before responding to telephone questions. When information desk staff and reference desk staff are busy assisting patrons, the telephones located in the reference area are not answered. However, every attempt is made to answer the telephones and answer callers' information questions or transfer calls if at all possible. A tally was not kept by the researcher during this study when the telephones in the reference department could not be answered.

The largest category of the total 460 questions represented questions involving instruction to the individual user (141 or 30.6%), followed by 119 (25.9%) directional questions (see Table 1).

The frequency of responses for the graduate reference assistant's time spent responding to requests for electronic maintenance are lower than might be expected (16 or 3.5%) due to the fact that graduate reference assistants

periodically check the printers, refilling printer paper and replacing printer ribbons as needed. The majority of electronic maintenance requests (14 or 87.5%) involved printer/computer troubleshooting.

Table 1.

Breakdown of Questions Asked at Information Desk by Type.

Question Type	f	%
Directional	119	25.9
Ready Reference	62	13.5
Instruction	141	30.6
Electronic Maintenance	16	3.5
Specific Subject	120	26.1
Research Referred to Subject Specialist	2	.4
Total	460	100.0

When directional questions were analyzed by type, it was found that the most commonly asked questions were related to location of periodicals (31 or 26.1%) or the location of other campus buildings and departments (30 or 25.2%). See Table 2 for additional information about the breakdown of directional questions.

Table 2.

Distribution of Directional Questions by Frequency of Type.

Type of Question	f	%
Library Materials by Call Number	26	21.9
Periodicals	31	26.1
Computer Labs	4	3.4
Copiers/Copier Cards	2	1.7
Reserve Materials	2	1.7
Items Held for Patrons	1	.8
Phone Books	4	3.4
College Catalogs	1	.8
Full-text Article Printouts from Power Pages	5	4.2
Other Campus Buildings and Departments	30	25.2
Lost and Found	1	.8
Facilities	3	2.5
Water Fountain	3	2.5
Requests for Office Supplies	6	5
Total	119	100.0

The majority of questions (16 or 25.8 %) that were answered by the researcher from information sources shelved in the ready reference collection involved the use of handbooks or manuals. Nine (14.5%) of the ready reference questions were related to inquiries about library hours. See Table 3 for additional statistics on sources used to answer ready reference questions.

Table 3.

Responses to Ready Reference Queries by Type of Information Source.

Type of Information Source	f	%
Library Hours	9	14.5
Almanacs	2	3.2
Dictionaries	4	6.5
Encyclopedias	6	9.7
Directories	8	12.9
Handbooks/Manuals	16	25.8
Library Policies	6	9.7
May 4th Information Packets	2	4.8
Other Ready Reference Materials	8	12.9
Total	62	100.0

Instructional questions (141 or 30.6%) accounted for the greatest number of questions at the information desk for the period under study. One hundred and one (71.6%) required instruction to individual patrons in the use of the online catalog, research databases, or the World Wide Web/Internet. (Fifty-nine of these questions dealing with computer instruction involved training in the use of research databases or CD-ROM stations.) Explanations of how to request interlibrary loan materials or information about interlibrary loan policies accounted for 25 (17.7%) of the total instructional questions. Table 4 gives the frequency of the kinds of instructional questions.

Table 4.

Frequency of the Types of Instructional Questions.

Types of Instruction	*f*	%
Online Catalog, Research Databases, WWW	101	71.6
Searching Printed Reference Tools	3	2.1
Interlibrary Loan Requests and Policies	25	17.7
How to Print from Computers	10	7.1
How to Access OPAC from Home Computer	2	1.4

CHAPTER 5.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This preliminary analysis of questions asked and services offered at the Information Desk of Kent State University's main campus library is intended to determine the value of this library service. The purpose of the study is also to show any strengths and weaknesses in the training of Information Desk workers and the quality of the services they provide.

Graduate reference assistants and library staff from other departments who have assigned work schedules at the Information Desk are given extensive hands-on training in the use of the online catalog, the research databases, and the World Wide Web/Internet. This study proves that this training is essential for those who provide information assistance, since 101 (22%) of the total 460 questions answered involved individualized instruction in the use of electronic resources.

Thirty (6.5%) of the questions were directional questions to other campus buildings and departments. Since campus maps and directories are often inadequate, Information Desk assistants should be given tours of other library departments, other campus libraries, and other major campus departments.

Thirty-one (6.7%) of the questions were inquiries about the location of the main periodicals' collection which is housed on the second floor of the library.

Signs are needed to make the location of the main collection of periodicals obvious to the library user.

One hundred and twenty (26.1%) of the total questions taken during the study were subject requests that usually require looking in more than one information source. Only 11 of these questions were referred to reference librarians; the researcher wonders if more questions should have been directed to reference librarians in order to provide more efficient service.

Each time the Information Desk employee gives assistance with an electronic resource or information search, he/she must leave the desk unattended. The reference librarians attempt to cover the Information Desk when this occurs, but they are often away from their desks assisting patrons elsewhere on the floor. Further studies should be done to determine if reference services should be even more differentiated. For example, certain staff could answer directional and ready reference questions without leaving the Information Desk. Other staff members could assist with electronic sources and subject requests that require them to work out in the reference area away from the Information Desk.

According to the statistics taken during this study, 53 questions (11.5%) were taken via telephone. As mentioned earlier, this is not a true count of the reference calls placed to Kent State's main information desk by phone. When the information desk assistant is busy helping a patron in the reference department, the telephone is not answered. A further study of the information requests actually made by telephone to Kent State's Information Desk and Reference

Department might indicate the need for a separate telephone reference area located apart from the main reference area.

Of course, a study of questions asked of one graduate assistant working scheduled hours at the information desk is inadequate to determine improvements that could be made in services. It is recommended that Information Desk assistants and reference librarians at the two reference desks conduct this same study during all scheduled work hours in order to get an adequate picture of actually what questions are asked at which desks. A complete study is necessary in order to truly analyze the quality and efficiency of reference training and reference services provided in this reference department.

APPENDIX

DATA CODING SHEET

INFORMATION DESK QUESTIONS

Question #_____ Date:_____ Time:_____ In Person___ /By Phone___

A. Directional Question:_____

Library Materials by Call Number (1)

Periodicals (2) Computer Labs (3) Copiers/Copier Cards (4)

Reserve Materials (5) Items Held for Patrons (6) Phone Books (7)

College Catalogs (8) Full-text Article Printouts from Power Pages (9)

Other Campus Buildings and Departments (10) Lost and Found (11)

Facilities (12) Water Fountain (13) Requests for Office Supplies (14)

B. Ready Reference:_____

Library Hours (1) Almanacs (2) Dictionaries (3) Encyclopedias (4)

Directories (5) Handbooks/Manuals (6) Library Policies (7)

May 4th Information Packets (8)

Other Ready Reference Materials (Tax Forms, Pathfinders, Ohio Revised Code, Atlases, etc.) (9)

C. Instruction:_____

Searching the Online Catalog, Research Databases, World Wide Web/Internet (1) Searching Printed Reference Tools (2)

Requesting Interlibrary Loans/Interlibrary Loan Policies (3)

How to Print from Computers (4)

How to access Online Catalog from Home Computer (5)

D. Electronic Maintenance:_____

Paper Refill (1) Ribbon Replacement (2)

Printer/Computer Troubleshooting (3)

E. Specific Subject Questions:_____

Information Desk Assistance (1) Referral to Reference Librarian (2)

F. Research Questions Referred to Subject Specialists:_____

Yes (1) No (2)

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